

Conference Review: Muslims in Multicultural Societies

By Dr Zachariah Matthews

The “International Conference on Muslims in Multicultural Societies” held in Singapore 14-15 July 2010, was convened by Professor Tariq Ramadan and hosted by the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS). The Conference was organised by the MUIS Academy in association with Oxford University’s faculty of Oriental Studies, the University of Melbourne’s National Centre of Excellence for Islamic Studies and the National University of Singapore’s Malay Studies department.

More than 20 international scholars, academics and community leaders presented papers relevant to the theme. The organisation and facilitation of the event was extremely professional with the venue at the Grand Hyatt Singapore adding to the experience. MUIS was an extremely gracious host and certainly sets a high standard by living up to its motto of “a community of excellence.”

The Conference was attended by more than 250 delegates from 23 countries. I was fortunate by the Grace of Allah, the Almighty to attend in my capacity as the president of the Australian Islamic Mission and would like to present some of the issues that I found beneficial and interesting.

The highlight of the Conference for me was certainly Professor Ramadan’s contributions as well as those of Professor Sherman Jackson from the University of Michigan and Dr Albakri Ahmed, Dean of the MUIS Academy and others. This perhaps reflects a personal bias as they were the key figures in the program that motivated my participation. I was disappointed that Dr Ingrid Mattson from the Hartford Seminary and president of the Islamic Society of North America was unfortunately unable to attend as scheduled.

The Senior Minister of the Republic of Singapore, Mr Goh Chok Tong, was the guest of honour and delivered the keynote address. One interesting remark he made was that due to globalisation, multicultural communities are becoming the norm. In my view the shift to monoculturalism was mainly a colonialist-era imposition as multiculturalism existed in several major centres of the world previously. Thus the key challenge of our era is the transition back to multicultural communities where current models of co-existence will come under scrutiny.

The Deputy Mufti of Singapore, Ustath Fatris Bakaram, in his theme paper “Islam and multiculturalism,” highlighted that the Prophet (pbuh) himself influenced by diverse Makkah (idol-worshippers, followers of Prophet Ibrahim, Christians, traders, etc) was therefore able to establish Madina as a city-state where provisions were made for a plural society with common space regulations.

Professor Tariq Ramadan in the closing plenary session summarised that the main objectives of the Conference were to share experiences by “looking within” while remaining open to the outside world without sacrificing our principles. It was important and fundamental to remain faithful to the foundational principles and values of Islam. Another important objective was to make the transition from a victim mentality to autonomous empowerment. It was also important to review our contributions to multicultural societies and learn how to deal with current complexities without indulging in confusion.

He also outlined the core values that emerged during the conference – values that delegates needed to take with them and infuse in their respective fields of endeavour. These values are:

- Confidence (based on *tawakkul `alallah* – a reliance on Allah)

- Humility (through continual purification of the heart in order to counter the ego and avoid arrogance)
- Dignity (universal values that promote the dignity of all the Children of Adam)
- Mercy (as exemplified by the Prophet of Mercy, Muhammad pbuh)
- Justice (an important condition for the achievement of peace)
- Service (to all of God's creatures)
- Critical thinking (not confusing respect with silence in the face of the need for serious and constructive questioning)

Professor Sherman Jackson in his presentation made some interesting observations. Firstly, that the creedal formula "There is no god but God," points to a spirit of protest, an orientation towards resistance of competing presumptions – for example, when the justice of the state is assessed against the justice of God. He also emphasised that Muslims in multicultural societies needed to develop their own cultural and intellectual authority in order to gain dignified respect as a minority within a dominant culture. During side discussions with Dr Jackson he lamented to me about the problem with many Muslims not being able to assert their own individual pride of faith and surety of purpose thus undermining any potential leverage to be gained from the "under-dog" effect. He was of course framing this in the context of his own Afro-American community and the strides that they have made in past history.

In his presentation he also corrected the common misunderstanding with regard to the caution by the Prophet (pbuh) of imitating the other. Citing as evidence the report by Sh Al'iz Ibn Abdussalaam (d660CE/1262H), known as the *Sultan Al-'Ulama* (the ruler among jurists), which clarified that the prohibition of "imitating" others (or borrowing from) meant only when it clearly contradicted a fundamental Islamic edict or if it resulted in undue cultural influence. As an example, the initial prohibition by the Prophet (s) to visit graves and then later when Muslim cultural authority was established the prohibition was lifted. Conversely, he referred to (not by name), Ataturk's use of "soft power" to undermine Muslim cultural authority when he legislated the change of Muslim headgear to the Western-style hat.

This is a similar problem I see Muslims facing today with regard to the *hijab*, *niqab*, minarets and others. It is a form of power struggle between the dominant culture and minority culture using cultural symbols as the proxy. Dr Jackson proposed that a Muslim cultural deficit could not just simply be replaced by resisting the culture of the other. Muslims should however plot a path between cultural rejectionism on the one hand and cultural assimilation on the other.

He also complained of the absence of the power of imagination, the creative (aesthetic and cultural) faculties of Muslims who focus primarily on the home and the mosque but neglect the space between (and this is where we are failing especially our youth).

Professor Tariq Ramadan's presentation was indeed worth the trip. He propounded several concepts but the two that I found most relevant from my own perspective were the need for Muslims to focus on the area of "Applied Islamic Ethics" as a mark of distinction; and the need for "transformational reform" as a step beyond adaptive reform. With regard to the ethical and moral system of Islam it has a lot to offer pluralistic societies in areas such as the "ethics of citizenship," etc. Muslims needed to be ethical and not betray their principles by for example calling for justice only when it involves them – the Islamic principle is "justice for all."

With regard to the second concept of "transformational reform," he pointed out that the Shariah was robust enough to dynamically cater for all contexts and eventualities. The reform he was talking about was more to do with reforming people's minds rather than reforming Islam. Three terms he referred to were *tajdeed* (renewal), *islah* (reform) and *ihyaa* (enliven). Transformational reform meant going beyond merely adapting to current realities in pluralistic societies, to improving the situation to one that is better. This can

only be done when Muslims are confident rather than apologetic and defensive (displaying a defeatist mentality).

Dr Albakri Ahmad in his theme paper “Institutional and community capabilities for viable futures,” emphasised that leadership was key to ensuring progress and development of Muslim communities. Another aspect that I found useful in his presentation was the importance of developing cognitive capabilities (thinking ahead, thinking again and thinking across). He also briefly reviewed the “Viable Systems Model” for developing enhanced institutional capabilities.

The conference was certainly not without controversy and challenge given the wide range of ideas that were presented. Some of the ideas promoted by certain speakers troubled me. These included:

- That Islam in multicultural societies needed to be de-politicised. This view was challenged by other speakers. In my view politics is the main game that affects most aspects of life today, so how can Muslims operate in a vacuum?
- That there is no longer a need for an Islamic state or something similar. Again, how can we limit the aspirations of Muslims so drastically?
- That there should only be “one law for all” in multicultural societies. This was strange given the Conference was being held in Singapore where provisions exist for legal pluralism. I concede that this is a complex area but my concern is that there may be two underlying issues at play – one is authoritarianism by the dominant culture coinciding with an “adaptive capitulation” by the minority. My argument is if we are diverse peoples attempting to manage our coexistence in harmony then is the lion king and all others submissive (i.e., the dominant dictates without accommodating for difference even in law)? In the Australian context accommodation seems to be quite fine when there is money to be made (e.g., halal certification and Islamic finance).

Two issues that were perhaps in my view not dealt with in sufficient detail during the Conference included the concept of “equal citizenship” and “intra-cultural/Muslim diversity management” with racism and intolerance significant problems.

Overall, the Conference was beneficial and worth the trip. The friendships and networks that I established will be cherished and utilised. This was not my first MUIS Conference and I was once again impressed. Many thanks and congratulations to them - may Allah, the Almighty bless and reward their work.

I look forward to reading Professor Tariq Ramadan’s book “Radical Reform” (published 2008).

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